

Olssen, Erik; Clyde Griffin and Frank Jones (2010) *An Accidental Utopia?*
University of Otago Press

Reviewed by Peter Davis

This is a book-length social history and structural sociology of three southern Dunedin suburbs between 1880 and 1940, a period when the new settler society was establishing itself, consolidating in urban form, and experiencing by turns recession, war, economic growth and political turmoil. The data are based on electoral and marriage records and there is a strong theme of an emergent class structure in an urban, social, political and economic microcosm of the larger society. The title – *An Accidental Utopia?* – captures the egalitarianism and optimism that marked this period of early nation building.

It is a long time since I have had the pleasure of reading such a substantial piece of New Zealand scholarship in the tradition of structural sociology, albeit within a social historian's frame (and so without much of the conceptual apparatus of a sociological text). David Pearson's book on *Johnsonville* and the book by Pearson and Thorns on social stratification in New Zealand (*Eclipse of Equality*) are the only ones that come to mind from recent memory, and those are from over 25 years ago, and neither matches the sheer scale of empirical work we are presented with in this book under the lead authorship of Erik Olssen, Emeritus Professor of History at Otago, and published by that University's Press.

Indeed, it would be almost impossible to do this kind of work now. Structural sociology is pretty much out of fashion, as are the quantitative techniques used in this book alongside the more traditional methods of social history. But more than this, the Caversham project enjoyed nearly a decade of FoRST funding and had the steady and visionary leadership of Erik Olssen from the 1970s until a decade after his retirement in 2001. This is a rare commitment. In this time a large data base was compiled from marriage and electoral records on the southern suburbs of Dunedin. This required skill sets beyond the conventional – for example, the consistent management of large-scale data bases over a long period of time and their systematic and detailed interrogation. Around this, in the best tradition of a school or programme of research, we see

evidence of a host of dissertations and theses compiled by Otago students on various aspects of the social history of the area. These cohere and contribute to a mosaic that is a marvel to behold in our otherwise small-scale and “cottage industry”-style academic community.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of this work is its ambition. Erik Olssen and his colleagues – but Professor Olssen principally – seek to do nothing less than develop an argument about the social structure and urban expression of a new settler society viewed through the prism of the detailed historical and quantitative analysis of information about the southern suburbs of Dunedin. Class, occupational and economic development, an emerging ethos of egalitarianism, gender relations to a degree, patterns of urban settlement for sure, and the emergence of the organised and political expression of labour (among the first in the world) - these are the themes, analytical and historical, that underpin this richly detailed case study. In addition we are treated to some cross-national comparative work, and the intermixing of historical and quantitative techniques, courtesy of Erik Olssen’s two co-authors, Clyde Griffin (Vassar College) and Frank Jones (Australian National University, who also co-authored a book with me on comparative social structure in the 1980s). The fact that all three authors are retired speaks to the special mix of skills needed and the long-run dedication of scholarly resources required for a book of this empirical reach, analytical ambition, and intellectual calibre.

The book is “of its time” in another sense. Although it could be argued otherwise, Dunedin probably is – and was – a critical case study and exemplary of the new settler society emerging in the late nineteenth century. A century later – and indeed well before – this is not something one could plausibly maintain. Apart from anything else, ethnic difference barely registers in this social portrait of southern Dunedin, then as now. Auckland is the urban setting that marks the New Zealand society now forming out of the relations of class and ethnicity, with new and far more powerful forces of globalisation. In Dunedin local industries formed and then stretched through New Zealand; Auckland barely manages to hold its own in an international division of labour that fast promises to see our premier city a branch economy and almost a feeder suburb to Sydney and other metropolitan centres in Australia and across the world. Yet, a programme of research, transposed to Auckland, somewhat along the lines that Erik Olssen led in its modest beginnings of the social history of

southern Dunedin, could do so much for our understanding of the modern and post-modern New Zealand in its vibrant, structural and cultural complexity.

As its sub-title suggests – “Social mobility and the foundations of an egalitarian society” – the focus of this social history is on social structure, more specifically the class structure, the opportunities for movement within it, the permeability of boundaries, and the possibilities for political mobilisation and action. Agency is mentioned, structuration is discussed, and the role of cultural factors is weighed; but in the end this is a structuralist approach. This is a social history of a more demographic and structural character. My own feeling is that this is a legitimate focus. There is a practical justification – the data are there – but perhaps also a conceptual one as well; arguably, sociology has not developed the conceptual and empirical tools in the cultural domain of a societal scope, temporal consistency and conceptual coherence that it is possible to match in the structural area (although we see little of this kind of densely-empirical structural research in modern-day New Zealand social science).

Nevertheless, there is one area where, to a degree, these two – culture and structure – intersect. In many instances the only comparable and consistent time series data that the authors had to hand came from marriage certification, since information on bride and groom and the parents was available, and this could provide vital clues on social mobility and alliances across class lines. But more than this, these data bring in the private world of domestic relations, gender roles and home and hearth alongside the more conventional male worlds of work and community affairs. This is not exploited much in this volume – perhaps more in a previous one (*Sites of Gender*) – but it does demonstrate the potential for tapping issues of both social structure and culture, ethnicity and class, gender and age, in building a portrait of society from existing data collected for other purposes.

There are missteps in this book. The contributions from the different authors and the different strands of data, do not always integrate well. As a sociologist, one often gets the sense that past historical data can be shaped to prove a point in a way that experimental and causal data cannot. But these are minor quibbles. We must be deeply grateful to Erik Olssen and his team for showing us how social science research – in this case, social history and historical sociology – can be done, and can be done at a scale, empirical reach and detail, and level of methodological and analytical sophistication that are nowhere matched in contemporary social science research in New Zealand. This

is a superb role model for our craft. For that alone I must salute the Dunedin team. But it also richly embellishes a project of crucial and strategic dimensions – both academically and morally - on our small, multi-faceted and sometimes precarious social and political democracy that I hope will stimulate others to follow.